

# Pacific Standard

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## STOP WITH THE 'CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE' SCARE TACTICS

It's an alarmist, politically driven catchphrase. And, from a scientific perspective, it has little credibility.

JIMMY TOBIAS · AUG 15, 2017

Wildfires can be a fright to witness. If you've ever watched a fir tree burst into flames, or experienced the furious heat of burning underbrush, or seen the towering columns of smoke and ash that incinerating forests throw into the sky, then you know what I'm talking about. Wildfires are an awesome and awful force. They move fast, they burn hot. Sometimes they destroy homes, sometimes people get caught in their path.

Fire season is underway right now in the American West. In places like eastern Idaho or western Montana, where I live, fires can be found in pretty much every direction, roads are often blocked, and forests can be closed for weeks due to burning timber. For those living in such a place, it's reasonable to be anxious, afraid, even a bit annoyed.

Industrial interests, political operatives, and fast-talking politicians recognize this fundamental reality, and they make the most of it. Indeed, they have become adept at exploiting fear of wildfires to promote their own ends and agendas.

Consider, for instance, the phrase "catastrophic wildfire." It's a term that evokes calamity, cataclysm, havoc, and horror; it's also a common utterance these days. The media uses it. Government officials use it. Even climate activists use it. But no one uses it more frequently than industrial interests, anti-conservation activists, and their political allies.

Here, for instance, is an excerpt from a 2016 [blog post](#) featured on the website of the American Land Council, a leading member of the public lands seizure movement, which perfectly summarizes the right-wing rhetoric around "catastrophic" wildfires:

*Wildfires occur naturally and have always been a part of the seasonal cycle in the West, it declares, but the size and intensity of the fires have dramatically increased in recent years due, in large measure, to the gross mismanagement of the national forests by the U.S. Forest Service and the incessant lawsuits of radical environmentalists that have thwarted all reasonable attempts at proper forest management.*

Similar messaging has been deployed in recent months around forest policy on federal lands as the timber industry and its friends on Capitol Hill try to pass the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017. The bill aims to [cut loopholes](#) in environmental laws and reduce public involvement in federal management decisions in order to boost timber production on national forests and the like. The justification for doing so? Nick Smith, the executive director of Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities, a timber-industry-allied non-profit, [explains](#) in the *Hill*:

*Congress should pass this legislation without delay, because the Forest Service estimates that at least 58 million acres of national forest are at high, or very high, risk of catastrophic wildfire. Due to bureaucracy, litigation and the unsustainable costs of fighting today's mega-fires, the agency treats only a small fraction of this amount on a yearly basis.*

The message is clear: Catastrophic wildfires are big and scary and omnipresent, and the only way to defeat them is by cutting more timber, even if that means hamstringing environmental laws.

## **"THE TERM CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE IS SCIENTIFICALLY BANKRUPT, THERE IS NO QUESTION ABOUT IT."**

It's war rhetoric, basically, and it's in vogue right now. Trouble is, "catastrophic wildfire" is mostly a myth. It is an ill-defined, alarmist, and politically driven catchphrase that obfuscates science and stirs up fear. It's a term whose regular, propagandistic use has rendered it almost meaningless.

"The term catastrophic wildfire is scientifically bankrupt, there is no question about it," says [Chad Hanson](#), a research ecologist and fire expert with the John Muir Project in California. "It has no scientific credibility."

"It is a political and economic term," he adds, a "cudgel" used by politicians and interest groups to frighten people into supporting policies (like the Resilient Federal Forests Act) that are not in the public interest.

Hanson has studied the effects of large, high-intensity wildfires for years and, along with many other scientists, he believes the prevailing political discourse about wildland fire in the United States is fundamentally misinformed.

For one, the common perception, often promoted in the media, that wildfires are out of control and overrunning the American West is deeply flawed. In fact, nearly the opposite is true. The *New York Times*, in an [August profile](#) of Hanson's work, reported that "reams of evidence suggest the acreage that burned [in the U.S. before European settlement] was more than is allowed to burn today—possibly 20 million or 30 million acres in a typical year. Today, closer to four or five million acres burn every year."

What's more, it's not at all clear that wildfires have become more severe, or more "catastrophic" in recent years, as popular narratives might suggest. Hanson, for instance, points to a [peer-reviewed paper](#) published by The Royal Society in 2016 that found little indication that fires have become more severe in the American West.

*[M]any consider wildfire as an accelerating problem, with widely held perceptions both in the media and scientific papers of increasing fire occurrence, severity and resulting losses. ... However, important exceptions aside, the quantitative evidence available does not support these perceived overall trends. Instead, global area burned appears to have overall declined over past decades, and there is increasing evidence that there is less fire in the global landscape today than centuries ago. Regarding fire severity, limited data are available. For the western USA, they indicate little change overall, and also that area burned at high severity has overall declined compared to pre-European settlement.*

Even when fires do burn hot, even when they ignite canopies and [sweep through large swaths of forest](#), they are often highly beneficial from an ecological standpoint.

"What hundreds of studies show is that patches of high-intensity fire creates one of the most ecologically important and biodiverse habitat in our forests, it creates snag forest habitat," Hanson says. "That habitat type is comparable in terms of wildlife abundance and native biodiversity to old growth forest. It is incredibly vibrant."

Timothy Ingalsbee, a fire ecologist and the executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics & Ecology, an organization that advocates for fire policy reform, largely agrees with this assessment. He believes the "catastrophic wildfire" hype is a harmful influence on forest policy in the U.S.

"I don't think [the term] really has scientific merit, that is the bottom line," he says. "It is popular vernacular that got picked up and adopted and used, but I don't think it has any scientific merit and there are no real metrics for it either." His organization publishes a "reporter's guide to wildland fire" that warns journalists against using often inaccurate and explicitly pejorative terms like "catastrophic" to describe wildfires. "[T]hese words," the guide asserts, "have become politicized terms with not-so-subtle ideological intentions for promoting fire policies that favor existing bureaucratic institutions and economic interests."

None of this, of course, is meant to suggest that wildfires can't cause catastrophe. As Hanson readily admits, any loss of human life or property is always a catastrophe and fires can result in both. Stephen Pyne, a prominent fire historian and a professor at Arizona State University, adds that one might also call a catastrophe any fire that results in the eradication of endangered species populations or the spread of invasive species like cheatgrass, to offer a few examples.

But Pyne too believes that the term "catastrophic wildfire" is often used to promote particular political ends.

This country has many problems related to fire, including a fire deficit in many places, he says, and "lumping them all together under a label of catastrophic fire isn't helpful."

Ultimately, the point is this: Be skeptical of the prevailing discourse about forest fires. Next time you hear a politician, lobbyist, reporter, or a climate campaigner use the phrase "catastrophic wildfire," understand that someone, whatever the intention, may be misleading you.